

# The Conquering Christ

Message 4

## *Seven Seals*

Revelation 6:1-7:17

### *It's About Jesus!*

Revelation is not about the end of the world. Nor is it primarily about events in the first century, although it was sent to first century churches. Many people find Revelation stimulating because it seems to tantalize us with clues to the end of the world. Others find it maddeningly frustrating for the same reason. But both groups of people miss the point. Revelation is a book about Jesus and written by Jesus. The opening sentence has Jesus in it. The first vision is a vision of Jesus. The last vision is a picture of Jesus living with His people, and the book closes with the plea that Jesus come soon. If you love Jesus, you will love this book – even if you are never quite sure what it all means. And if you previously have looked at Revelation as a code book for end times, I urge you to cease focusing on trivialities and look to Jesus! Jesus is wonderful. He is the object of our worship.

But Revelation is also a book about the future, and here we are in the fourth week of our studies and so far we have encountered nothing predictive. Never fear – tonight we will get into the prophecies of the future – and enough violence to satisfy even the most blood-thirsty among you. But first a brief review of interpretive principles. Number one, Revelation is a picture book. It is not a history book, so we should not expect a story to unfold chronologically. It is not a discourse text, so we should not expect a series of logically reasoned arguments. As a picture book it is a series of visions which present an alternate view of reality. More important than understanding all the details is responding to the pictures. Last week we saw a vision of God's throne room. It is a dazzling, wonderful, amazing place. God and His angels are there. Any normal person should respond in awe, even if he cannot grasp all the details. The second interpretive principle is that we must understand the symbols in their biblical context. The horsemen, the earthquake, the seal, etc. in this week's passage mean what the Bible says they mean. It is illegitimate to go guessing what they might mean. So we need to scour the Bible to discover how these symbols were used previously.

Tonight we introduce a third principle for interpreting Revelation. The events here concern the earth, but they are seen from a heavenly perspective. That is the reason for the throne-room vision we saw last week. It orients us to the perspective we need to understand the following visions. This book is about spiritual realities and events. It uses symbols to reveal these unseen spiritual realities. It is not about political developments. Revelation concerns political issues only to the extent that they have a bearing on the spiritual world. So when we get to the passage about Babylon, it is not about the city named Babylon, nor about the corrupt political power – it is a symbol for the corrupt spiritual power.

I suppose 99% of us here tonight were taught that Revelation is about the end of the world. I was too. But in the first message we noticed that the book claims to be a message for the first century church. Heroic efforts have been launched to explain these references as a prediction of the end, but I do not think they succeed. The best way to understand this book is to see it as a message from Jesus to His church under persecution in the first century. Its purpose is to explain what is happening to them, and to encourage them to persevere. Now even if you disagree with me on this point, we still have much in common, and we share the most important message of the book – the supreme majesty of our Lord Jesus, and His triumph over His enemies.

### *Six Seals*

What is the truth about the war in Iraq? Is it a critical battle in a long war against terrorism – a war we cannot lose? Or is it a never-ending quagmire of ancient tribal and sectarian disputes? If the latter, I think most of us would think we should exit and let the sides fight among themselves. But if it is in fact an

important battle in the war on terror, we cannot leave until there is real peace. Consequently our leaders are striving to interpret the conflict there according to a broader view of the issues at stake. If they persuade the American people that this is a fight for our survival as a civilization, we will support whatever effort it takes to win. If not, we will eventually give up. How you view the present conflict determines how you fight and how long you persevere.

This was the situation in the first century. Christians were being persecuted – first by the Jews, then by the Romans. People were being imprisoned, tortured, and killed. And for what cause? For a Jewish myth about a poor preacher who supposedly rose from the dead? But most Jews did not believe this myth. And where was this amazing fellow now? In heaven? Isn't it mighty convenient to say he is in heaven? That makes verifying the myth impossible. You can see how tenuous the faith of many new Christians must have been. When finally they are given the choice of offering incense to the genius of Caesar (a harmless enough act) or being eaten alive by the lions – well, would you go to such a horrible death for an invisible preacher?

Revelation is Jesus' message from heaven. He says, "I reign in glory over all the earth. I died for you. Worship me. Trust me. Die with me, and you will share my reign. Your future reward is worth your present suffering." Like any successful leader, Jesus interprets reality for His followers, and so encourages them to follow Him into the struggle.

A casual reader of Revelation will notice that the number seven shows up all over the place. Tonight we are going to study the seven seals, but there are also seven trumpets and seven bowls. Furthermore, the seals, trumpets, and bowls are all very similar. Since Revelation is not a history book, many interpreters have suggested that the seals, trumpets, and bowls are all about the same events. The idea is that they are presented a little differently and repeated three times for the sake of emphasis. This proposal carries a lot of weight, but I think there is a better explanation. In scripture seals are used to keep something closed, trumpets are used to announce news, and bowls signify God's anger. What we have in these three sets of sevens is God first opening the book of salvation, then announcing His plan to the world, and finally implementing His plan. By opening the seals we can read the plan for completing our salvation. Then this plan is proclaimed all over the earth. Finally God completes what He began.

Now when I speak of completing our salvation, I am using biblical terminology. We usually use the word salvation to refer to our first believing in Jesus and beginning to follow Him. The Bible sometimes uses the word that way, too. But the Bible also speaks of our salvation as something God does in the future. Salvation is a process that began with God's choosing us before He made the world and calling Israel to be the infant church. Salvation was fully revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. But salvation will not be completed until all evil is destroyed, Satan is destroyed, and we are raised in our new eternal bodies to live with Jesus forever. Revelation shows us the end of the story of salvation and encourages us to believe in Jesus and persevere in the face of hardships.

Now let's sharpen up this interpretation a bit. Revelation was written to first century Christians about events that would happen soon – likely in their lifetimes. (Refer to the first message for more on the time of Revelation.) With this in mind, the seals refer to events close to the time of Jesus. The trumpets refer to the proclamation of the gospel by the apostles and prophets. And the bowls refer to Jesus' final destruction of His enemies who were tormenting the early church. So let's look now at the seals.

Of course you cannot read a scroll until all the seals are opened. I say this to remind us that we are reading a vision which consists of symbols. This does not mean it is not real. It is just a different way of speaking, like a different language. There are no material seals on a physical scroll. The vision is of a real plan for salvation which is unfolded in seven scenes, beginning with four horsemen.

### ***Four Horsemen***

The four horsemen of the apocalypse (another name for Revelation) have inspired fear and wonder in all ages. And no surprise – they bring awful conditions: war, famine, plague, and death. Even their appearance makes one shudder. The first is white, the second blood red, the third black as death, and the last a sickly greenish color. You can easily imagine how this vision terrified Europe caught in the grip of the bubonic plague and threatened by Islam on its southern and eastern borders. A third of the population died, and Spain and Constantinople fell to the infidels, leading many to conclude that the four horsemen had arrived. But there is a better interpretation.

The first horse brings the gospel as it spreads over the earth conquering sin and evil. Remember, Revelation is not primarily about political events. It is about spiritual events – the operation of the angels and messengers of the gospel that shape the surface political events. So the white horse is not about a human king and his wars. It is about Jesus and the war of the gospel against sin and evil. This horse rode out on the day of Pentecost when Jesus sent His Spirit to empower the disciples to proclaim this gospel.

The second horse brings conflict. This is spiritual conflict provoked by the gospel. Jesus predicted that the gospel would do this. In Matthew 10:34-36 Jesus said,

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

The sword of the second horseman is not the ordinary battle sword, but a short sword or knife, which would be used to prepare a sacrifice. When the gospel is preached, conflict erupts and people get hurt and even killed. Those who die in Jesus' service are offered as a sacrifice for Him.

The third horse brings shortage, but not a complete famine. Grain is the food of common people, while the wealthy could afford oil and wine. The empire would not suffer famine, but poor Christians would struggle to survive. Bread is also Old Covenant food, while wine is New Covenant food. Oil is a common symbol for the Holy Spirit, so this might indicate the passing of the Old Covenant and the coming of the New by the Holy Spirit.

As the gospel spread through the empire the conflict intensified. The book of Acts describes the struggle of the early church. Stephen was killed, followed by the apostle James – and no doubt there were others. The Jews chased Christians from city to city in their zeal to stamp out the gospel of Jesus. Eventually the Romans turned against the church and sent some believers to the lions. Thus the fourth horse brings persecution and death.

It is important to note here the cause of these things. What unleashed these terrible events? Remember, they did not begin until the Lamb started to break open the seals. Shocking as it seems, Jesus is the orchestrator of these disasters. This is a very hard teaching to accept. When we experience a calamity, we naturally wonder why it happened. What caused the collapse of the Twin Towers? Why was hurricane Katrina so destructive? Why do some people suffer so and others escape certain disaster? Any normal person must ask, "Where was God when this happened?" In cases like this people typically rush to reassure us that God did not cause these disasters. God loves people. God sent Jesus to save us. In an evil world God loves and cherishes us. We are assured that God did not cause these terrible things to happen.

Certainly God loves us, and no doubt God brings a million blessings to His people. But is it really true that God is not behind all that happens, even the bad things? Is it possible that God could be all-

powerful and all-knowing, as the Bible describes Him – and not know or not prevent calamity? Furthermore, is it really comforting to think that God did not plan these disasters? If God did not plan them, who did? And where was God then? Are we prepared to believe that Satan was able to overpower God? Or did He catch God off-guard and sneak something by Him? Or did God momentarily lose His touch and let the universe slip out of control for a while? You see, any attempt to absolve God of responsibility for disasters leaves us in a worse place than before. As jarring as it sounds, the most comforting news is that God is in control. We may be distressed, we may be frustrated and confused, we may become angry at God. These are natural responses to severe trouble. But the only comfort is knowing that the God who loves us has everything under control. So here we see that the difficulties Christians were facing were not only known by God – they were planned and executed by Him. God wrote the scroll and the Lamb opened it. Although persecution was prophesied, there had to be something good in it. Apparently these trials were necessary for salvation to be completed.

### ***Prayers and the End***

When the fifth seal was opened, John was able to see under the altar which was before the throne of God. There were the souls of the martyrs. Their bodies were dead, and they did not yet have new resurrected bodies. These are the people who were killed by the sword, famine, pestilence, and beasts of the fourth horseman. Now they are with God forever. But look at what they are doing! “They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (Revelation 6:10) Are you surprised that people who loved Jesus so much that they would die for Him are carrying on so? Are you shocked at their vengeful demand for the blood of their murderers? Should they not rather have asked for mercy on their enemies, as Jesus did?

We must remember that God is a God of mercy and justice both. God is not vengeful. Neither is He indulgent. God’s mercy does not compromise His justice, and His justice does not negate His mercy. The mystery of the ages is how God can be both merciful while just. The church lost sight of the answer to this question at one point, and it tormented a German monk. Martin Luther knew he deserved hell for his sins. He knew that if God were to be just, He would send Luther to hell. But if God were to be merciful, He would spare Luther – compromising justice. Luther finally found peace for his soul when he discovered that mercy and justice met on the cross. Jesus died to satisfy God’s just anger against sin – and He died in our place to provide mercy for those who believe in Him.

But is there mercy for those who do not believe in Jesus? Absolutely! God sends the sun and rain and all the good gifts of life to those who hate Him. He sends messengers of the gospel to call them to repentance. God endures the hostility of sinners for years and decades while they plot against Him. God is merciful to all men. But He is also just, and a day of judgment must come. Until that day anyone may turn from his sins and be forgiven. Even those who persecute the church and torment believers will find forgiveness with God if they turn from their evil ways. But if they do not repent, justice will be served. Those who persecute the church will be tormented by a just God who does not allow His own children to be mistreated with impunity. This is right and good. So it is right and good that believers cry out to God for justice. They are simply expressing God’s own heart. This is not the cry of anger. It is not the bloodthirsty cry of pleasure in tormenting the tormentors. It is the cry borne of a sense of injustice and a desire that God be true to His own character.

The sixth seal returns us to earth, and now all hell breaks loose. This scene shows God answering the prayers of His beloved saints, as the whole earth falls apart. But what does this vision of the collapsing universe mean? In this picture book we would not think this describes events in the material world, would we? Fortunately these symbols of the collapsing universe are easy to interpret when we see how they are used earlier in the scripture. Turn to Isaiah 13:9-13.

Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it.<sup>10</sup> For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.<sup>11</sup> I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.<sup>12</sup> I will make people more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir.<sup>13</sup> Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

You see the same symbolic language. Sometimes people mistakenly think that this passage in Isaiah refers to some far distant time in the future. But verse one of this chapter makes clear that this is about Isaiah's own era. "The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw." (Isaiah 13:1) And within 200 years, Babylon was destroyed. Collapsing universe language is symbolic of the end of the socio-political order. This is what it meant in the Old Testament, and this is what it means in the New. So the sixth seal refers to the end of society as the first century church knew it. In particular, it refers to the end of the Jewish-Roman alliance which was persecuting the church, and the end of the Old Covenant which fueled that fire.

This passage does not refer to an atomic explosion or the sun burning out, but even social revolutions are catastrophic. As society unravels the kings, generals, powerful, and everyone suffers. They recognize that the end of their world is coming, and that Jesus is responsible. He is bringing justice against those who have been killing His followers. They run to hide, but they do not turn from their evil ways and embrace the Lamb who can save them.

### ***Israel and the Church***

Just as the end is about to come, an angel rises with the sun and calls for a halt to the proceedings. Before the end God will seal His servants. This seal is different than the seals on the scroll. This is not a seal to close a document. It is a mark of ownership and authenticity. This seal is similar to engraving your name on your camera. It is a permanent mark of ownership. It is like the stamp a notary public places on a legal document. It certifies that the document is genuine, not a forgery. It is similar to the blood the Israelites placed on their door posts when the death angel passed through Egypt. The blood marked God's people, and the angel did not kill their first-born sons that night. This seal marks God's people as His own, and guarantees that He will care for them.

Chapter seven has two parts. The first is concerned with the tribes of Israel and the second is about people from all over the earth. At first you might think these are two separate groups of people, but that is unlikely. A better explanation is that these are two visions of the same event. In this symbol book the tribes of Israel are symbolic of the whole church. Here are a few reasons for this view. First, all of the tribes except Judah are extinct. When Assyria conquered the ten northern tribes, she scattered them throughout the world and they have disappeared. Only the tribe of Judah remains. That is why the first century Israelites are called Jews. There are no people from Reuben, Gad, etc. to be sealed. Second, these huge identical numbers are obviously not a real count. They symbolize a vast number of God's own people.

Third, after Jesus came the distinction between Jew and Gentile has disappeared. Of course there are still ethnic and cultural differences, but they mean nothing as far as salvation is concerned. Paul goes to great lengths to press this point in the book of Ephesians. Let's read Ephesians 2:11-16.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands –<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you

who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

You see that now it is impossible to consider Jews and Gentiles as separate groups in God's eyes. In his letter to the Romans (11:13-24) Paul says that Gentiles are like a branch grafted onto the vine of Israel. So the New Testament view is that the church is the New Israel, and Israel was the immature church.

What clinches this explanation for me is the difference between how John perceived the two paragraphs. Verse four says he "heard" the number of sealed Israelites. Then verse nine tells us what he actually saw. This construction is similar to what we saw in chapter five. There John *heard* the announcement of the Lion of Judah. Then in the next verse we are told that he *saw* a Lamb. The Lion and the Lamb are the same person, viewed differently. So the 144,000 Israelites and the vast multitude are the same church.

### ***The Lamb Rules!***

The main point of this passage is this: the Lamb Rules! Jesus controls history. He sends out His gospel, He allows the wicked to prosper for a time, and finally He brings judgment. In all this He loves His followers and cares for His saints.

The application of this passage is to follow the example of the saints and pray. Pray for God to be merciful while there is time, and pray for God to bring justice against the wicked. Perhaps you are not accustomed to praying this way, but I hope you can see it is biblical. Today Christians are persecuted in the Sudan, in Iraq, in China, in North Korea, in India, and elsewhere. Pray for God to turn the hearts of their tormentors to serve Him. And pray that if they refuse, may the Lamb destroy them so the church may worship in peace.

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February 13, 2007